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FM AMEMBASSY ROME
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INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEAHL/DHS WASHDC
RUEAUSA/DOL WASHDC
RUEHFL/AMCONSUL FLORENCE 1620
RUEHNP/AMCONSUL NAPLES 1716
RUEHMIL/AMCONSUL MILAN 7457

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 002191

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [SMIG](#) [IT](#)
SUBJECT: ITALY WIDENS THE WELCOME MAT FOR IMMIGRANTS

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11. (SBU) Summary. The Prodi government has been surprisingly proactive on immigration issues since it took office in May 2006. The Council of Ministers today will introduce legislation to cut from ten to five years the time needed for immigrants to qualify for citizenship and will offer, for the first time, citizenship to immigrants born in Italy. By increasing the quota for legal workers, the government will increase the number of legal immigrants by 12 percent in the next year. The government also eased family reunification rules for immigrants and exempted new EU member states from residency permit requirements. The Interior Minister now is considering temporary resident permits for immigrants seeking work. All these proposals reflect the need to attract low-skilled labor to replace a shrinking workforce in an aging society with a low birthrate and low economic growth. More structural reforms will be needed to recruit high-skilled workers and better align immigration policy to labor supply and demand. End summary.

Easing Access to Citizenship

12. (SBU) The Council of Ministers is expected to approve and send to Parliament today a new law on citizenship. The proposal, drafted by Interior Minister Amato, would reduce from ten to five years the amount of time a legal immigrant must wait before applying for citizenship, currently a long and uncertain process in Italy. According to the Catholic NOG Caritas, the measure could affect 900,000 immigrants currently in Italy. The proposed reform would also:

--introduce the concept of jus soli by giving citizenship to immigrants born in Italy to parents who have resided legally here for five years, or to parents born in Italy who are legal residents;

--introduce the concept of jus domicili by allowing minor children of parents who are residing and working legally in Italy to apply for citizenship when they reach majority age if they have attended school for three years or worked legally for at least a year.

Legal Immigration to Soar

13. (SBU) On July 21, the Prodi government approved a new quota for legal immigration, one that will increase the number of immigrants by 12 percent to approximately 3.3 million (out of a population of 57 million). Under the 2003 Bossi-Fini law, the Council of Ministers has the authority to limit the number of foreign workers that can be hired by companies or families each year by controlling approval for labor contracts. In March 2006, more than 500,000 work

permit requests were submitted but only 170,000 were approved by the Berlusconi government. PM Prodi decided to approval all requests submitted as of mid-July.

¶4. (SBU) In principle under Bossi-Fini, companies must apply for foreign workers; when they receive approval, the workers then can obtain visas and work permits that allow them to enter the country. In reality, most of these applicants were already here, working illegally, so the Prodi decision will effectively legalize an estimated 350,000 illegal immigrants. These individuals will still have to sneak out of the country and re-enter legally, a process that can take up to nine months.

¶5. (SBU) Under Bossi-Fini, the Berlusconi government legalized 700,000 immigrants in 2002-2003, mostly those from Eastern Europe. However, the Center-Right has been critical of Prodi's decision to increase quota levels. Former U/S of Labor Maurizio Sacconi argued that the increase will lead to more illegal immigration, a reduction in wages and increased unemployment. The anti-immigrant Northern League party suggested the decision would hamper integration of immigrations and produce segregation and racism.

Temporary Residence Permits/Family Reunification

¶6. (SBU) Center-Left leaders have been particularly critical of Bossi-Fini, claiming that it has not succeeded in either discouraging illegal immigration or effectively matching supply and demand for labor, and that it undermined family reunification. Minister of Social Solidarity Paolo Ferrero has said that the government will amend Bossi-Fini. Interior Minister Giuliano Amato has announced he will introduce a new plan this fall to create temporary residence permits for immigrants in search of work who have family or NGO sponsors.

¶7. (SBU) On July 28, the Council of Ministers approved a measure to promote family reunification by simplifying procedures and extending

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entitlements to parents of legal immigrants. The Center-Right criticized the change, arguing that the government had not planned for the consequences in terms of increased demands for welfare, senior citizen or child services.

Outreach to New EU Member States

¶8. (SBU) On July 21, the Prodi government decided to open Italy's borders to new EU member states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia and Hungary). Workers from these countries now are exempted from residence permit requirements established at the time of their EU accession. Italy is thus following the lead of the UK, Sweden and Ireland that have already guaranteed freedom of movement to citizens of these states. The Prodi government's goal is to attract more culturally homogeneous immigrants who are eager to integrate into Italian society, and the initiative was supported by the Center-Right opposition.

Voting Rights for Immigrants?

¶9. (SBU) Also under discussion is whether to give legal immigrants the right to vote in local elections. Several municipalities last year proposed offering this right but the Council of Ministers did not agree. In some cities like Rome, immigrants are allowed to elect non-voting members of the city council. The Democrats of the Left (DS) party (the strongest party in the Prodi coalition) may introduce a bill in the fall to give immigrants the limited right to vote in local elections. However, it would likely require amending the Italian constitution and would be controversial.

Illegal Immigration: Still Growing

¶10. (SBU) In the first half of 2006, 11,000 illegal immigrants washed up on Italy's shores, primarily via sea routes from Libya and

the North African coast. Most were deported, but not before they overwhelmed immigrant processing centers in and around Lampedusa. Minister Amato called on Deputy EC President Frattini for assistance; Frattini reportedly is exploring the possibility of speeding up implementation of joint EU-Libya patrols of the Mediterranean, scheduled to begin in September. Italy-Libya discussions on how to enhance Libyan border controls continued this week in Rome.

¶11. (SBU) Comment: The Prodi government has been surprisingly proactive on immigration issues since the May 2006 elections. Faced with low economic growth, the second lowest birthrate in Europe and a shrinking supply of young workers in an aging, welfare-dependent society, they need to attract immigrants. Labor trends show that Italy needs unskilled workers in all sectors, with growing demand for immigrants particularly to provide child and elder care. In the short term, these reforms should double the number of legal immigrants within five-seven years and are likely to encourage continued illegal immigration. However, Italy still needs to attract high-skilled professionals and reform Bossi-Fini to better match demand with labor supply.

¶12. (SBU) Comment continued: Until recently, Italy has been a country of emigrants rather than immigrants, and its laws do not yet reflect new economic and global migration realities. The citizenship changes, if enacted, would be a major step in proving that Italy is welcoming immigrants by providing a so-far lacking genuine prospect of citizenship. The government, however, has yet to develop adequate national programs to provide immigrants with the language skills, job placement and housing assistance needed to support real integration.

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